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ABSTRACT

This article discusses language planning in the People's Republic of China, and opens by commenting on the difficulty in observing the language planning process in China, particularly in the area of decision-making. A brief history of language planning is provided. Follcwing the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, a shift took place from interest in the alphabetic writing of Chinese, including a separate writing of the main dialects, to the simplification of characters and the promotion of a standard language. The newly devised pinyin system of transcription was relegated to a secondary role. Important events that made for this shift are reviewed, including the establishment of the Bureau for the Promotion of Standard Language, and the government Committee for Research in Chinese Writing Reform. The history of the promotion of the standard language is examined, along with information concerning language planning, including publications, that was once available. Current available information concerning the implementation of various aspects of the language reforms is mentioned. The article concludes with remarks on the contact of foreign linguists, particularly Americans, with Chinese linguists and language planners. (CLK)

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Language Planning in China

By JOHN DeFRANCIS*

The attempt to observe language planning in the People's Republic of China is hampered by the dearth of published material in this area and by the difficulty of establishing contact with concerned individuals and organizations. The biggest unknown is the decision-making process. After the establishment of the People's Republic in October 1949 it soon became evident that a fundamental shift had taken place. The strong interest displayed in the thirties and forties for a reform emphasizing alphabetic writing of Chinese, including the separate writing of the main dialects, gave way after 1949 to a program that placed the greatest stress on simplification of the characters and promotion of a standard language while relegating a newly devised transcription, the *pinyin* system, to a secondary role in support of the traditional characters.

The rationale for this change and the mechanism by which it was brought about are only dimly appreciated. Before 1949 there were many private organizations, some of which received support from the Yenan government, that engaged in activities in the general area of language and script reform. Many of these organizations died out during the course of the war against Japan and the civil war that followed it. After 1949 several of the organizations were re-activated and a number of individuals who had previously been prominent in promotion of Latinized writing resumed their publishing activities in these areas. In October 1949, Wu Yü-chang, a veteran of the Latinized writing movement, headed up a broadly-based unofficial organization devoted to studying various aspects of writing reform — the Chinese Writing Reform Association.

It appears, however, that the Ministry of Education had already come to a decision to give primary emphasis to simplification of characters and promotion of the standard language. To this end, it established a Bureau for the Promotion of the Standard Language. In December, 1951 the government established a Committee for Research on Chinese Writing Reform. The groups that had been reactivated to promote Latinized writing, including the separate writing of the various Chinese "dialects," went out of existence and its members came out in support of the new official policy. These included Wu Yü-chang, who became vice-chairman of the Committee for Research Chinese Reform, Kuo Mo-jo, a vice-premier who was also head of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Ni Hai-shu, T'o Mu, Ts'ao Po-han, and many others.

In 1954 the Committee, along with the Ministry of Education, jointly published a Draft Plan for Simplification. After nationwide discussion of the Plan a major conference on Chinese Writing Reform was called in October, 1955. An amended plan for simplification of the Chinese characters was approved, passed on to the State Council, and finally promulgated in January 1956.

Dialects versus standard language

In the area of promotion of the standard language, the Chinese Academy of Sciences sponsored a week-long Technical Conference on Problems of the Standardization of Modern Chinese in October, 1955. Although in previous years this subject was sure to evoke a good deal of sharp discussion about the problems of dialects versus standard language, there was no echo of this in the 1955 conferences, which saw even previous supporters of separate dialect romanizations fall in with the new line. The Chinese Academy of Science appears to have continued to contribute toward standardization through such units as its Linguistic Research Unit, Bureau of Compilation and Translation, and Committee on Translation and Publications, but little is known of the precise history or workings of these groups.

The task of developing a new transcription system was turned over by the government to a committee of experts who included representatives of various schools, such as the old Latinization (Wu Yü-chang and Ni Hai-chu) and National Language Romanization (Lo Ch'ang-p'ei and Li Chin-hsi). The first draft was published February 1956, submitted

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China . . .

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to the people for their reactions, and subsequently revised. The revised *pinyin* scheme received official approval from the National People's Congress in February, 1958.

Information about the various activities in the general area of language planning was disseminated in official pronouncements and reports and in semi-official publications and by individual writers such as those already mentioned. To these may be added the names of Chou Yu-kuang, Cheng Hsin-lin, Wang Li and Lü Shu-hsiang. Some material of a more scholarly nature was available in *Zhongguo Yuwen* (Chinese Language and Literature) before it suspended publication at the time of the Cultural Revolution. It has not resumed publication and little information, scholarly or otherwise, has been available for a decade or more. In May 1974, however, the newspaper *Guangming Ribao* began to devote a full page on the 10th and 25th of each month to problems chiefly in the area of promoting the simplified characters and the standard language. It appears that many little groups have been organized in educational institutions, communes, and other organizations to consider concrete implementation of one or another aspect of the reforms that have taken place, but there is no clear indication of centralized or carefully organized planning. With the meager literature that has become available there are tantalizing passages that denounce Liu Shao-ch'i as retarding the use of *pinyin* and that seem to suggest that the last word has not yet been pronounced on the fate of the transcription and the general direction of language planning. The material needs careful study to determine the direction that such planning is taking and to keep abreast of the many new names that are beginning to figure in discussion of the matter.

A number of linguists from the United States and other countries have visited China in recent years and have obtained some additional information about developments in the area of linguistics and language planning. The observations of the American Linguistics Delegation, which met with members of the Committee for Language Reform in the course of its visit to the People's Republic of China in the Fall of 1974, will be available in a report scheduled for publication by the University of Texas in late 1975. This volume is entitled *Language and Linguistics in the PRC.* □

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Readers Invited to Contribute: The editor invites readers to send in news which they would like to share with interested language planning practitioners and scholars.